

Sūrah Zilzāl

Structure and Theme

In this *Sūrah*, the reality that a day will definitely come when every deed done by man is brought to light is depicted. All his labours will be exposed and nothing will remain hidden. Whatever good or evil he had done even where no one could have seen him will be placed in front of him, and he will be rewarded or punished accordingly. On that day, each man alone will stand answerable for his own deeds. No other person will in any way be able to help or support him nor will anyone be present to intercede for him.

To elucidate this fact, a graphic picture of the tremendous cataclysm which will take place on that day is drawn. As a result of this devastation, everything buried in the earth will be cast out. The earth will then narrate its story at the intimation of the Almighty, enabling its inhabitants to have a clear idea of all what they had said or done upon its surface or had hidden beneath it. After this every person will see the smallest good he had done as well as all his evils, however imperceptible they may be.

During the time of the Prophet (sws), those who used to deny the Day of Judgement had basically three misconceptions. Firstly, they had extreme doubts about the destruction of this world. Secondly, they reckoned that it was not possible to keep an account of all the deeds of each and every person. Thirdly, they were of the opinion that even if the above two were true, there was no need for them to be fearful because the deities they had associated with God would intercede for them and would save them from any punishment. They went as far as to believe that these intercessors would even win for them a high rank and status in the Hereafter. All these three misconceptions are dealt with in this *sūrah*, and their hollowness is categorically pointed out.

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
إِذَا زُلْزِلَتِ الْأَرْضُ زِلْزَالَهَا (١) وَأَخْرَجَتِ الْأَرْضُ أَثْقَالَهَا (٢) وَقَالَ الْإِنْسَانُ مَا لَهَا (٣)
يَوْمَئِذٍ تُحَدِّثُ أَخْبَارَهَا (٤) بِأَنَّ رَبَّكَ أَوْحَىٰ لَهَا (٥)

يَوْمَئِذٍ يَصْدُرُ النَّاسُ أَشْتَاتًا لِّيُرَوْا أَعْمَالُهُمْ (٦) فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ (٧)
وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ (٨)

When the earth is shaken the way it ought to be shaken, and the earth casts forth its burdens and man cries out: What is the matter with her?! On that Day, she will narrate her story at the intimation of your Lord. (1-5)

On that Day, men will appear alone so that their deeds can be shown to them. Then whoever has done the smallest bit of good will see it, and whoever has done the smallest bit of evil will also see it. (6-8)

Explanation

إِذَا زُلْزِلَتِ الْأَرْضُ زِلْزَالَهَا^١

If the various usages of the Arabic language are kept in consideration, the word إِذَا (when) used in this manner serves as a reminder of what comes after it. One can unfold this meaning as: “Keep that time in mind” or “Beware when such and such a thing will happen”.

The word زُلْزَالَ is grammatically an absolute object (*maf'ūl-i-mutliq*) which stresses the verb زُلْزِلَتْ. However, its annexation (*idāfat*) to the word أَرْضُ (earth) by means of a pronoun is adding a special meaning in the stress which must be borne in mind, otherwise the emphasis in the verse cannot be properly appreciated. Keeping in mind this technical delicacy, the correct meaning is: “when the earth shall be shaken the way it ought to be shaken” or: “when the earth shall be shaken the way it is destined to be shaken”. In other words, what is really being implied here is that the extent to which it will be shaken cannot be imagined today. The actual way in which it will reel, totter and stagger as pre-ordained by the Almighty is an event beyond imagination. But one thing which is absolutely certain is that all this is bound to happen. Therefore, it is in the well being of a person to remain alert about its arrival and not spend his life remaining unmindful to it.

وَأُخْرِجَتِ الْأَرْضُ أَثْقَالَهَا^٢

The word ثَقْلُ means “weight” or “burden”. Here, its foremost connotation are the dead who have been buried in the earth and who will be thrown overboard by it on the Day of Judgement. But, since the word is also used in the general sense, it can also imply the buried riches and

1. When the earth is shaken the way it ought to be shaken

2. And the earth shall cast forth its burdens.

treasures as well as any traces of the hidden offences committed by criminals. I have already explained this under the following verse of Sūrah Inshiqāq: (٤:٨٤) وَأَلْقَتْ مَا فِيهَا وَتَخَلَّتْ (it will cast out whatever is inside and become empty, (84:4)) and will explain further under the following verse of the next sūrah: (٩:١٠٠) أَفَلَا يَعْلَمُ إِذَا بُعْثِرَ مَا فِي الْقُبُورِ (when the graves will be spewed out, (100:9)).

وَقَالَ الْإِنْسَانُ مَا لَهَا ³(٣)

This is a description of how the terrible situation will effect men's senses. Struck with consternation they will cry out: What is happening to the earth, why is its wobbling about not coming to an end and why is it throwing out everything within it? This tension will also grip the evil doers when they will observe the record of their deeds. In the words of the Qur'ān, they will exclaim: هَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا (٤٩:١٨) (what a strange Book! No small or big deed has been left out from its grasp, (18:49)).

يَوْمَئِذٍ نُّحَدِّثُ أَخْبَارَهَا (٤) بِأَنَّ رَبَّكَ أَوْحَىٰ لَهَا ⁴(٥)

When the Day comes, the earth will narrate an account of all the good and evil deeds done upon it. It is indicated at other places of the Qur'ān that the limbs of criminals will be given the power of speech by the Almighty on the Day of Judgement. Their own limbs will testify against them, and even their skins and the hairs upon them will bear witness against them. In the words of the Qur'ān the criminals will inquire from their skins:

وَقَالُوا لِمَلُودِهِمْ لَمْ شَهِدْتُمْ عَلَيْنَا قَالُوا أَنْطَقَنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنْطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ
أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ (٢١:٤١)

And the sinners will ask from their skins: “Why did you testify against us?” They will: “The God who has given speech to everyone today has given it to us as well.” (41:21)

Whatever a person does in this world is either done upon or beneath the earth. As such, it must be regarded as the greatest witness to all his deeds. Just as the Almighty will endow man's limbs and organs with the faculty of speech to narrate his life's record and bear witness against

3. And man cries out: What is the matter with her?!

4. On that Day, she will narrate her story at the intimation of your Lord.

him, the earth also will be made vocal by Him that it may also recount his history.

The word *wahī* used in these verses means “intimation” or “indication”. It is used in this meaning in other verses of the Qur’ān as well, for example: (٥:٨٤) وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ (it will obey her God’s directive, and only this is befitting for her, (84:5)). It is clear that the earth will rehearse everyone’s record at the behest of God only. Whatever will happen will happen because the Almighty will order it and everything will be compelled to obey him. It can be seen that what has been stated in the above cited verse (41:21) is asserted here in a slightly different manner.

يَوْمَئِذٍ يَصْدُرُ النَّاسُ أَشْتَاتًا لِّيُرَوْا أَعْمَالُهُمْ⁵ (٦)

The word أَشْتَاتٌ means “in a separate or solitary manner”. In other words, on the Day of Judgement, people will emerge from their graves without having their family about them. None of their tribesmen or relatives, comrades or supporters will be present with them. Also, they will be without the pomp and show and the worldly riches they had amassed. Even the deities they had associated with God will not be present to intercede for them. Everyone will stand alone to reckon with the results of his own deeds. This particular aspect has been highlighted in other places of the Qur’ān as well. Thus in Sūrah Maryam, the words used are: (٩٥:١٩) وَكُلُّهُمْ آتِيهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَرْدًا (and everyone will appear alone before his Lord, (19:95)), while in Sūrah An ‘am, it is said: وَلَقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا (and you came to Us alone, the way We created you the first time, (6:94)).

The words لِّيُرَوْا أَعْمَالُهُمْ (so that their deeds could be shown to them) express the reason why people will be brought before the Almighty. They will observe and experience the results of their labours done in the previous world. Linguistically, the verb “shown” here is used to denote its own outcome.

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ (٧) وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ (٨)⁶

These are the details which relate to the last part of the previous verse. No doubt, every person will see both his evil and good deeds but this will be according to the principle mentioned elsewhere in the Qur’ān: A believer may not see some of his evil deeds because some of the good

5. On that day, men will appear alone so that their deeds can be shown to them.

6. Then whoever has done the smallest bit of good will see it, and whoever has done the smallest bit of evil will also see it.

ones will have compensated for them. Similarly, a disbeliever will not find all his good deeds in his record because some of his misdeeds and heretical beliefs will have rendered them null and void, eluding him from their reward.

After being adjudged according to this principle, people will attain eternal salvation or will be doomed forever on the basis of the following Qur'ānic verse:

فَأَمَّا مَنْ ثَقُلَتْ مَوَازِينُهُ فَهُوَ فِي عِيشَةٍ رَّاضِيَةٍ وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَفَّتْ مَوَازِينُهُ فَأُمُّهُ هَاوِيَةٌ

(١٠١: ٦-٩)

Hence, whose scales are heavy will dwell in bliss, and whose scales are light, the abyss of Hell will be his abode. (101:6-9)
